



SUPRAKASH RAY ON THE ISSUES OF NATION AND NATIONALISM, BENGAL (1969)

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INTRODUCTION:

If the historiography of Communism in India is in itself an underdeveloped sub-discipline, then the phase of Naxalite politics and thought within the history of Communism has received even lesser attention. There are many descriptions of the Naxalbari movement but not much on the intricate intellectuality of many of its partisans. In this article we provide some material for political theorists, sociologists, intellectual historians to analyse this Naxalite intellectuality. A school-master called Sudhir Bhattacharya (1915-1990) lived in Calcutta and wrote on historical and political issues from his own partisan location. His views on nation and nationalism demand patient reading.

NATION AND NATIONALISM:

In *Jatisamasyay Marxbaad* (1969) Bhattacharya used the pseudonym of 'Suprakash Ray' and based himself on Stalin's *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Lenin's texts on self-determination, the *Communist Manifesto* and Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. There were clear forays into his historical research on peasant insurgency to grasp the specificity of national question in India, Pakistan, and Burma.

For Ray, "the national question is a modern problem." But amorphous national spatial territories – based on language, religion, ethnicity – indeed existed in the pre-modern era. With the development of modern capitalist system, the capitalist class – to facilitate the creation of markets for its commodities – instituted an intimate connection between various regions and people of the proto-national space. The power of capitalism to create the 'national' proved to be unprecedented. It removed feudal states (but not social power) to club together entire populations. Capitalism triggered the massive assembly of working class in industrial areas and structured a relationship between industrial cities and raw material-producing rural areas. This very process created a collaborative and servile middle class. This middle class then spoke for capitalism and propagated the idea of nation and nationalism. In colonial India nationalist movement opposed British imperialism to serve indigenous capitalism. "Indian capitalists – with help from middle classes – created nationalism and to perpetuate their exploitative machinery brandished India as one nation while in truth it was a palimpsest of many nationalities."

This was a radical declaration. Especially in the context Ray constructed: in a 1923 report from the 12th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party Stalin enumerated eight hundred tribes and communities in colonial/national India. After that, through continuous struggle new communities with their own set of features and demands surfaced. The 1961 Census Report revealed that a thousand linguistic communities populated the territory of Indian state. Various tribes and communities were fighting for autonomy. The struggle of these communities against British imperialism was relentless for two hundred years. The tribal peasant masses rendered the history of peasant insurgency luminous. Naga, Kuki-Mizo, Garo, Santhal, Oraon, Munda tribes and the Kashmiris were still struggling in 1969. But this long and inexhaustible struggle was ignored by British imperialism, Indian state and Communist leadership. In 1946, the Communist Party of 'Joshi-Dange-Adhikary-Ranadive' presented a memorandum to the British 'Cabinet Mission' which enumerated merely eighteen nations within colonial India: Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sindh, Baluchistan, Pakhtunistan, Kashmir, West Punjab, Middle Punjab, Hindusthan, Bihar, Orissa, Bengal and Assam. Ray intervened: "Let us focus on a few regions. To call the homelands of Santhal, Munda, Oraon 'Bihar', to call the homelands of Khond and other tribes 'Orissa', to call the homeland of Gurkhas, Santhals, Lepchas 'Bengal', to call the homelands of Nagas, Mizos and other tribes 'Assam' – was not merely ignorance, it was deeply conspiratorial. The only purpose of the revisionist Communist leadership was to obfuscate the struggle of these communities against exploitation and oppression. They murdered Marxism by determining nationhood solely in terms of religion and supporting the Hindustan-Pakistan scheme." Religion was not the decisive element of nationality; this 'Marxist truth' was ignored by the revisionist leadership. This betrayal of the Communist leadership was to undermine the greater truth that "the national question can only be solved through revolution." The language of 'national integration' used by the Communist leadership from 1950s and 1960s had stopped them from taking a decisive stand on these democratic struggles.

This was an untenable position in terms of the Communist sequence that ordinary partisans like Ray constructed; and confusing too, since CPI (M) broadly retained the language of national liberation struggle and even democratic revolution. Unlike Ray of 1969, the party is still against the democratic struggle for self-determination in Kashmir. Most communities and areas that Ray mentioned are still struggling for freedom and democracy, and are seen as 'insurgent' and a 'problem'. Ray's sequencing act was relentless and most obdurate. Marxism and Communism were for him thoughts proceeding from events. Paris Commune, 1871 and Sholapur and Peshawar insurrections, 1930 were put in the same sequence of Communist politics. Rural areas on the fringes of Calcutta and Kashmir appeared in one rational sequence of politics. The Indian big bourgeoisie and landlords was a minor partner of imperialism. Conflicts and open antagonism had started cropping up between bourgeois cliques from different regions over their slices in the Indian and foreign markets. The strife between the Birla conglomerate and other capitalist clouts in the late 1960s validated his point, Ray asserted. Thoroughly tied to these developments was the direct attack of the big bourgeoisie on the working class for more profit. This attack assumed a dreadful proportion. Industrial crisis was permanent, and thousands of workers were being retrenched every day by the so-called reorganisation of industries. The working class was protesting in various locations every day. Another important condition was the sharpening antagonism between the small regional bourgeoisie and the big bourgeoisie, and in this struggle the suppressed regional nationalities and communities were asserting themselves with renewed resolve for full democratic autonomy. The contemporary struggle in Andhra demanding Ispat industry in the region was for Ray a bright spot in this trail. Peasant struggles against feudal exploitation were appearing with new revolutionary possibilities. Unemployment, hunger, increasing landlessness and indebtedness were opposed with revolutionary struggle in Bengal and beyond. These struggles were developing rapidly. The struggle of Naxalbari (1967), the struggle of Sonarpur-Bhangor, the peasant struggle in Bihar, the struggles in Uttar Pradesh and Andhra were affirming his contention. The liberation struggle of nations, tribes and communities were also revivifying itself in different territories of Indian state. The Kashmir struggle, the struggles in Naga-Mizo areas, the struggle of Girijans in Andhra, the struggle of tribal masses of Madhya Pradesh – among many more cases – were assuming momentum. The oppressed sections of the middle classes were struggling against growing unemployment and the increase in prices, 'strengthening the conditions of people's democratic revolution'. The complete dissociation of politics from objectal arrangements in Ray was entirely distinct from the statist, bureaucratic and macroeconomic approach taken to resolve political issues in the texts of Communist leadership.

Ray wrote that Santhal, Naga, Mizo, Riyang among others had dwelled hill and forest tracts practicing agriculture, retaining specificities of their clan and community. Only agriculture could not unite various communities into one nation. In Bengal, capitalist development was in full sway in the plains and forced various communities to mingle. That was how the so called 'Bengalis' emerged in nineteenth century. But in the north-east and north-west of these plains, various communities strove to regain their autonomy from capital and refused to be 'Bengali'. "In future these communities will unite and demand liberation and autonomy from the Indian state." The acute political prescience of these pronouncements in 1969 notwithstanding, Ray's learned hints at the limits of capital within a colonial-national setting and pitting of communities against colony, nation and capital reminds us of later elaborations in the works of scholars like Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee. For Ray this was not a failure of capital to universalise – which would have led him back to the project of statist nationalism in colonial/national India in lieu of proletarian internationalism – but rather subjective innovations of insurgent people bearing a clear programme. He brought out the revolutionary and Communist substance of the national liberation framework of the 1960s through Mao Tse-tung. He quoted: "In the final analysis struggle for national liberation is class struggle." And "For every exploited nation and class, revolution is the central question."

The inspection of the national question became necessary as Ray absorbed mass line politics of Cultural Revolution (1966). 'Mass line' tapped into the political power of a thoroughly disjunctive synthesis of 'nation' rather correctly for Ray. He proposed a 'front' to facilitate a people's war against the Indian state. The

struggles of working class, peasants, exploited middle class, national bourgeoisie and nation-communities were developing simultaneously yet disjointedly. "The unified form of these disjointed struggles will be the 'front' of people's democratic revolution here. But the unity of various struggles and a unified 'front' cannot build itself. A true Marxist-Leninist Communist Party is indispensable. The people's democratic revolution led by the working class will emancipate all oppressed classes, communities, castes and tribes and precipitate the socialist revolution."

The specific revolution in the territory of Indian state was determined by the exploitation and oppression of a tripartite apparatus – foreign imperialism, big bourgeoisie and feudal landlords, Ray argued. In a territory of many proto-national spaces revolution could not 'begin and end at one go over the entire stretch of colonial/national India'. Revolution here should be an accumulation of regional and local revolts happening one after the other or a few simultaneously. With the active cooperation of the proletariat, peasant revolutionary war would create liberated zones while the urban struggle of exploited middleclass and students would unite with working-class struggle in industrial areas to support sustenance and expansion of the zones liberated by the peasants. This was a sporadic, intense and singular reality of the late 1960s in Ray's Bengal. He related: peasants were an overwhelming 80% of the Indian people. Feudalism on one hand tied the peasantry to outmoded land relations and oppressive practices, on the other it arrested the full unfolding of productive forces in the landmass. The end of feudalism through an agrarian revolution was the central tenet of the revolution in colonial/national India, and the peasants were the primary column of democratic revolution. Led by the proletariat, the peasant army would eradicate the last vestiges of feudalism from rural areas and break constraints on people's creativity and thought. The workers would support the peasantry – existentially tied to the land – towards socialism. The various liberation struggles of the many nations would be organised and unified by the proletariat. These would inspire the oppressed middle class and small regional bourgeoisie to struggle. The liberation struggles would not remain disjointed and transform into an internationalist revolution that, in turn, would quickly pass to socialist revolution.

Ray followed Marxist critique of political economy and Lenin's theory of imperialism to understand the different phases of colonialism internationally. Competition led to war and the cost of war created a tumult within the oppressed nations and the nations within such nations. The First World War and the Second World War saw imperialism shed some of the resultant political discomfort while keeping intact its politico-economic suzerainty. India, Pakistan, Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia were some of the new states instituted after the Second World War. In the 1960s, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia were rejecting the imperialist attempt to conserve the status quo and carrying on anti-imperialist armed struggle for liberation. Among these, Laos and Vietnam were attempting to solve the national question through socialism. In stark opposition, India, Pakistan and Burma accepted the imperialist continuum as a boon. The states of India, Pakistan and Burma were tools created by imperialism. Capitalism hoisted on a thick feudalism held these three states together. It was imperialism that patterned a new feudalism in these countries (to immune itself from revolutionary mass struggles) and also selectively promoted indigenous capitalism servile to foreign masters. In the face of political upheavals, the direct role of colonial states receded in favour of comprador states of big bourgeoisie and landlords ruling over various nations and communities. Within these new regimes, major communities exploited and oppressed minor nations and communities. For Ray, the reason was that these new states were based on private property and class oppression, i.e., the exploitation of workers and peasants by capitalists and landlords. These states could not exist while not being massive coercive machines. The need to exploit and oppress the workers and peasants had created national conflicts and lengthened wars in the region. In Burma, Pakistan and India, the ruling elite waged wars against many communities; Karen in Burma, Pakhtoon and Afridi in Pakistan, Naga, Mizo, Kashmiris in India (to name a few cases). Thriving on exploitation and oppression, these states nurtured a regressive ruling class which ground down minorities and tribes and occupied resources of neighbouring states. Such states – in order to guard its self-interests and wage protracted wars – sought economic and military help from strong imperialist states. Inevitably these new states became completely servile to the imperialist powers – "like the so-called independent Indian state is", Ray stated in 1969. Its exorbitant defence expenditure intensified crisis in industrial and agricultural sectors; it was a de-facto slave to British and American imperialists and Soviet revisionists. Due to differential unfolding of capital within even a centralised state like colonial/national India, the capitalists and landlords were dominating various communities and tribes politically and economically. To veil this domination "Nehru created a smoke screen under the names of socialism, democratic socialism and national unity."

From Ray's vantage the nations of the world were divided into two camps. In one camp there were only a few imperialist nations. These nations, through monopoly capitalism, exploited the less advanced nations. The other camp was composed of colonies, semi-independent erstwhile colonies – 'with their emaciated people'. The Communist nations were also divided into two camps. "Some led by the revisionist Soviet Union supported imperialism, while the other led by China support people." In Ray's account of the situation in the territory of the Indian state, the proletariat, the lower sections of peasants and middle class, the various tribes and communities in colonial/national India; all sought liberation from the

exploitation of big bourgeoisie, landlords and foreign imperialism that included Soviet revisionists. The Soviet revisionists were restructuring the big bourgeoisie through aids, providing foreign markets and fields of capital investment, and through massive arm deals goading them to expansionism. British and American imperialism consistently renewed their right to exploit and oppress the country.

Ray had an acute understanding of the specific alignment of classes in terms of their corresponding political role. In the era of monopoly capitalism or imperialism, capitalist development in the Indian nation-state divided the bourgeoisie into two. One camp was that of the big bourgeoisie with their big monopoly industries while the other had the small regional bourgeoisie with their relatively small enterprises. In sync with the centripetal imperative of capital the monopolist big bourgeoisie ate up small enterprises. With the help of the state and foreign imperialism it captured the entire national market. It enjoyed monopolist access to foreign markets. To retain its rights of exclusive exploitation it entered into an alliance with foreign imperialists. It invited foreign imperialism to colonial/national India and – against people's interest – allowed it to exploit the masses through 'investments'. As junior partners in an apparatus of exploitation, the bourgeoisie became the main enemy of all communities and classes in the country. The small regional bourgeoisie also faced the wrath of big bourgeoisie, landlords and foreign imperialism. They could not access labour power and raw materials because of the obstacles set by big bourgeoisie and feudalism, while unfair competition with foreign imperialism destroyed their enterprises. The small bourgeoisie had the same set of reactionary enemies that the workers, peasants and oppressed communities had. The small bourgeoisie should join the revolutionary front as national bourgeoisie. In Ray's book, to enter the front this intermediary class would have to accept the leadership of the proletariat unconditionally and without vacillation, struggle against the three reactionary forces, support peasant insurrection against feudalism and recognise the autonomy of oppressed communities.

CONCLUSION:

Ray declared that bourgeois society was entirely incapable and burnt out; it could never resolve the national question. As long as the right to private property and the rule of capital continued, the enmity between nations and the oppression/exploitation of one nation of others was to increase and the emancipatory struggles of exploited communities and tribes were to intensify. 'Just as establishment of socialism cannot be imagined without the liberation of oppressed nations, capitalism and bourgeois rule cannot be imagined without the oppression of various nations'. Till the peasant masses and petty bourgeoisie remain under the spell of nationalism and are swayed by the dictates of the bourgeoisie, chauvinism and national conflicts were deemed inevitable. Only proletarian revolution could liberate the oppressed nations. Ray asserted that proletarian internationalism actively supported the full logic of nationalities beyond bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie chauvinism. He quoted from Communist Manifesto: "In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between the classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end."

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- V. Ibid, P-41-43.
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- VII. Ibid, P-12.
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- IX. Quoted in JM, P-31; Mao was expressing solidarity to the struggle of Black Americans in United States of America in 1964.
- X. Ibid, P-43.
- XI. Ibid, P-43-45.
- XII. Ibid; Ray's view pieced together from different but close location in this book, P-22, P-25-26, P-20.
- XIII. Ibid, P-35.
- XIV. Ibid, P-41-42.
- XV. Ibid, P-34-35.
- XVI. Ibid, P-28.
- XVII. From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, Open Source Socialist Publishing, 2008., P-33.